

OPINION

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Our runoff recommendations

Exercise your superhero voting power: At-Large 4 and HCC District 2 races still to be decided

Ever feel like your one puny vote doesn't make any difference? That your voice is no match against corporate lobbyists and deep-pocketed donors?

No doubt, our democracy needs a major tune-up, but today, at least, you can have a big impact. Early voting for local runoffs are from now until Dec. 9, and Election Day is Dec. 13. Turnout will likely be depressingly low. The silver lining is that if you do cast a ballot, you'll be many times more powerful than you would be during a general election.

Consider that in 2021, a Houston ISD board election was decided by less than 50 votes. You could tip an election like that if you educate friends and family, and bring them along to the polls.

Harris County has two runoff races — the At-Large 4 position for Houston City Council and the District 2 board trustee for Houston City College.

We know most voters don't have time to dig into the candidates' backgrounds. That's why we meet with the candidates, talk with experts, conduct background checks and more. Our goal is to share what we learn and explain our reasoning so you can make an informed choice, even if you disagree with us.



Salinas

City of Houston, Council Member, At-Large Position 4

Alejandra Salinas

Houston needs more council members who have the policy smarts and fearlessness to challenge the mayor. It's true with Mayor John Whitmire, and it was true of his predecessors.

When we first interviewed her in October, Alejandra Salinas, 35, stressed her desire to work collaboratively with the mayor and others on council. Recently, however, she showed a different side. After Whitmire admitted that Houston cooperates with U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, Salinas released a powerful response.

"This is wrong," she wrote on social media. "I am profoundly disappointed in the lack of transparency by the administration. One of my relatives, a U.S. citizen, was wrongly detained by ICE. He is OK, but the unlawful actions of ICE are not. Our city should not enable wrongful actors."

Salinas, who is a partner and trial attorney at an elite law firm, spelled out for us in a follow-up screening what questions need to be answered

so Houston and its police department can follow the law while minimizing cooperation with the Trump administration's immigration dragnet.

The other runoff candidate, Dwight Boykins, 62, represented District D on City Council for six years. He said he'd focus on infrastructure. Despite his experience and charm, and his backing by a broad coalition of Democrats and Republicans, we found his knowledge lacking on the very issues he cared about most, including infrastructure.

In our strong mayor form of government, all the departments, including the legal team, report to the mayor. Council members need their own in-depth research and analysis, whether they're working behind the scenes or mounting an out-in-the-open challenge to the mayor's authority. Salinas has the chops to do that effectively.



Patterson

Houston City College, Trustee, District II

Renee Jefferson Patterson

Oh what a mess local school boards have been of late. The dysfunction and allegations at what was

formerly known as Houston Community College checked all the boxes — sexual impropriety, bribery, racial discrimination. One dispute had to be resolved by the U.S. Supreme Court. Throw a pandemic in the mix and boy do you have problems, including the ouster of the long-time chancellor.

Thankfully, HCC's governance appears to have stabilized. Enrollment is up. The latest budget is in decent shape. Voters should stick with the incumbent. Renee Jefferson Patterson, 46, who was appointed to the position this year by the current board after the previous trustee won a race for the state Legislature. Even with just a few months of experience, she has a detailed understanding of the role and the opportunities ahead for HCC.

The challenger, Kathleen "Kathy" Lynch Gunter, 62, is a retired teacher who is seeking an HCC trustee position for the third time. We applaud Gunter's passion — this position isn't paid after all — but we urge the voters to choose stability and stick with the incumbent. The board of trustees and chancellor need to stay focused on improving outcomes such as completion rates in programs for welding, law enforcement, dental hygiene, construction and the many, many other career paths HCC offers.

Keep skies alive by saving Bolivar bird sanctuary

By Jed Aplaca

Most Houstonians know our region for its ports, pipelines, industry and booming growth. But at the mouth of the Houston Ship Channel lies one of the most extraordinary natural places on the Texas coast: Bolivar Flats Shorebird Sanctuary.

Stretching across 1,240 acres of beach, dunes, salt marsh and tidal flats on the Bolivar Peninsula, this sanctuary is one of the most important stopover points for migratory birds in North America. More than 300 bird species have been documented here, an astonishing level of diversity so close to the nation's busiest petrochemical corridor.

The sanctuary exists thanks in part to the North Jetty of the Houston Ship Channel, completed in 1898 from pink granite mined from Marble Falls, and laid with the assistance of a specially made narrow train track built out for miles on the water from the southern tip of Bolivar into the Gulf of Mexico. When longshore currents from the Mississippi River strike the jetty, they drop sediment and nutrients that feed an abundant community of crabs and other invertebrates. These plentiful food sources fuel the migration of hundreds of thousands of birds: gulls, terns, plovers, sandpipers, herons, curlews and the iconic American avocet, whose sweeping winter flocks can number in the tens of thousands in January and February.

Visitors from around the world come to Bolivar Flats for this amazing spectacle. The sight is especially awe-inspiring these days: In the past 50 years, overall bird numbers in North America are down by a third, mainly due to habitat loss. Across the continent, 3 billion birds fewer now fill the morning with song.

You don't have to be a birder to ap-



Brian Traylor/Houston Audubon

At Bolivar Flats, roseate spoonbills search for dinner as oil tankers ply the Houston Ship Channel.

preciate what's at stake. Protecting habitat for birds protects entire ecosystems, including the native plants, insects, prairies, marshes and the natural dynamics that keep our coast functioning.

And preserving this habitat protects people. Undeveloped coastal habitat acts as a natural buffer during storms, absorbing water and slowing surge before it reaches homes. At a time when Houston is investing heavily in increasingly needed flood resilience, protecting places like Bolivar Flats is not only good conservation; it's good infrastructure.

Houston Audubon has been working since the 1980s to preserve the sanctuary. Nearly all the surrounding land is



A snowy egret at Bolivar Flats Shorebird Sanctuary.

already protected, including an adjacent \$3 million purchase this past July, thanks to generous local foundations that augmented our funds.

Only one piece now remains vulnerable: a 27-acre parcel completely encircled by the sanctuary. It, too, will cost \$3 million. If developed, it would dramatically alter the surrounding habitat and undermine decades of conservation work.

The public understands the stakes. For the past three months, since our public campaign began, support for acquiring this final parcel has been remarkable. Many Houston-region donors have stepped up as well as donors from all over Texas. Residents in 35 other states as well as from Canada, Denmark and Germany have donated. We recently received a donation of nearly \$1 million from a national foundation, and have been blessed with

grants from many local and statewide foundations that acted with heroic speed.

Momentum is on our side, and we are close — very close — to ensuring that Bolivar Flats will remain protected forever.

Houstonians have always taken pride in our coast, even as we navigate the tension between growth and environmental stewardship. Bolivar Flats represents a chance to get it right. For wildlife, for coastal protection, and for future generations, this is a moment where Houston can lead.

Once places like this are lost, they don't come back. By protecting Bolivar Flats, we honor our natural heritage, strengthen the resilience of a vulnerable coastal community and preserve one of the most breathtaking ecological treasures within driving distance of downtown Houston.

It's a rare opportunity, and one worth seizing.

Jed Aplaca is president and CEO of Houston Audubon.

BIBLE VERSE

Return to your fortress, you prisoners of hope; even now I announce that I will restore twice as much to you.

Zechariah 9:12



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